

Applying Career Construction Theory to Female National Collegiate Athletic Association Division I Conference Commissioners

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Women's participation in collegiate sport has increased dramatically since the passage of Title IX, but there has not been a corresponding increase in the percentage of women in administrative positions. Women have, however, been successful obtaining leadership positions in conference offices, as more than 30% of National Collegiate Athletic Association Division I conference commissioners were women in 2016. This research used career construction theory as a framework to explore the experiences of these women. Findings revealed that participants constantly negotiate time spent on personal and professional obligations, and relationships created in the workplace turned into organic mentorship relationships. Participants felt that there were limited amounts of sexism in the workplace, but all discussed experiencing instances of sexism, indicating a culture of gender normalcy. Women may experience increased success in leadership positions at conference offices, compared with on-campus athletic departments, due to limited direct interaction with football and donors.

Keywords: athletic administration, career mobility, college sports, gender normalcy

It is well documented that since the passage of Title IX, the number of women participating in collegiate sport has dramatically increased (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014). However, women in leadership and coaching positions have grown at a significantly lower rate than the number of participants has (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014; Zgonc, 2010). The reduction in percentages is primarily due to the absorption of members of the Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women (AIAW) by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) in the early 1980s (Crowley, 2006). The NCAA began offering championships for women in 1982, and AIAW members chose to compete in those championships instead of the AIAW championships. The AIAW association eventually ceased existence in 1983, resulting in a reduction in the opportunities for leadership positions for women (Bell, 2008).

Women hold fewer than 25% of athletic director positions across the NCAA and less than 12% at the Division I level (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014; Taylor & Hardin, 2016). There has been a

slight increase of women in athletic department administration in the past decade (36.2%), but 11.3% of athletic departments do not have a woman in the administration in any capacity (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014). Women do hold nearly 50% of all head coaching positions for women's teams, but only 25% of head coaching positions overall (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014; Bass, Hardin, & Taylor, 2015). Conversely, women are fairly well represented in the position of conference commissioner within NCAA Division I as 11 of the 32 conference commissioners are women. It is possible that women have seen more success as conference officers, as opposed to on-campus administrative positions because conference offices are further removed from donors and the college athletics spotlight. Collegiate athletic departments receive a great deal of their revenue from donations (Fulks, 2015), and donors expect to have a voice in the hiring of athletic department coaches and administrators (Park, Ko, Kim, Sagas, & Eddosary, 2016). Male leaders are the norm, so it is difficult for women to secure high-level administrative positions, especially within collegiate athletics (Burton, Barr, Fink, & Bruening, 2009; Kamphoff, 2010; Taylor & Hardin, 2016). However, conference offices operate on a more "behind the scenes" basis. This makes it easier for conference offices to hire with a disregard to gender and societal norms and place more emphasis on experience and fit (Southeastern Conference Bylaws, 2016). Thus, the purpose of this study was

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to examine the experiences of women who are NCAA Division I conference commissioners and how they were able to ascend to these positions of leadership using career construction theory (CCT) as a theoretical framework.

Career Construction Theory

CCT focuses on exploring what individuals do and why they do it from an interpretive framework: How do individuals construct, process, and negotiate meaning (Savickas, 2005)? CCT provides a framework for examining how an individual chooses and why they choose specific professions. Savickas (2005) explained that CCT focuses on the vocational personality and behavior of individuals and how their personalities allow them to adapt to job changes during the course of a career. In attempts to be comprehensive, CCT incorporates the following components: career adaptability, vocational personality, and life themes (Hancock & Hums, 2016). More specifically, Savickas (2005) described that an individual's career path is molded by personal meaning, past memories, present experiences, and future aspirations. Researchers are able to use CCT to discover participants' personal and professional identities, as well as understand the decisions and values behind career paths as they are situated in socially constructed realities (Betz & Fitzgerald, 1987; Savickas, 2005). CCT is not able to predict career paths but can be utilized to understand decisions and choices made by individuals (Hancock & Hums, 2016).

Career adaptability, the first component of CCT, is the ability of an individual to cope with developmental tasks, such as learning new skills and contextual factors (e.g., structural and social determinants; Savickas, 2005). These contextual factors may influence a person's career aspirations and expectations. Career adaptability identifies the relationship between social expectations and occupational interests, an individual's skills and abilities, perceived as well as real opportunities, and the acceptance of an occupation by peers (Hancock & Hums, 2016).

Vocational personality, the second component of CCT, is a person's "career-related abilities, needs, values, and interests" (Savickas, 2005, p. 47). These abilities, needs, values, and interests are then reinforced by personal factors, such as self-efficacy, gender, personality, and human capital (Burke, 2007; Wentling, 2003). The career aspirations and expectations of women may be particularly influenced by gender role socialization and cultural norms. Often, choices about career paths (e.g., choosing a career, accepting a job, decision on whether or not to change jobs) are made in conjunction with other life choices (e.g., balancing work and family; Eccles, 1994). Life themes, the final component of CCT, work to give individuals purpose and make meaningful decisions in their work (Savickas, 2005). The integrated nature of decision making surrounding career development, and other life choices, may be helpful in uncovering why individuals make certain decisions regarding their career (Savickas, 2005).

Women in Collegiate Athletic Administration

CCT focuses on the meaning individuals place on career development. Savickas (2005) explained "careers do not unfold; they are constructed as individuals make choices that express their self-concepts and substantiate their goals in the social reality of work roles" (p. 43). This study focuses on the choices made and experiences of female NCAA Division I conference commissioners

during their career. Research has found that women struggle to advance to leadership positions because of cultural norms, gender normalcy, homologous reproduction, and lack of female mentors (Kamphoff, 2010; Taylor & Hardin, 2016). Societal views of masculinity and femininity are at the root of the issue particularly in the context of sport, as masculinity is privileged and associated with superior leadership (Anderson, 2008). Thus, women many times are perceived to lack the skills necessary to assume leadership positions in sport (Burton et al., 2009). Walker and Sator-Baldwin (2013) found that masculinity was deeply embedded within collegiate sport culture, and that women were seen as intruders. Furthermore, Pfister and Radtke (2009) found that conflict resolutions in sport organizations favored masculine qualities, thus leading to more women leaving leadership positions than men. Female employees were found to view controversies as a personal insult and would experience a great deal of suffering when they found themselves in a situation likely to result in conflict or power struggle (Pfister & Radtke, 2009). The favoring of masculine qualities may impact a female employee's ability to successfully resolve a conflict within the workplace. Employees are conditioned to believe to be successful, so they must adopt attributes and tendencies, such as self-confidence, assertiveness, and insensitivity. These characteristics may be unfamiliar to female employees, and they may not be comfortable adopting these traits. Therefore, women who portray characteristics inconsistent with the cultural norms of the organization (e.g., emotional) may not be as highly valued as her male counterparts.

These socially constructed views of masculinity and femininity then lead to gender normalcy and homologous reproduction within sport organizations, which perpetuate the belief that women are not capable of obtaining and keeping leadership positions in college athletics, and thus prevent women from pursuing these positions (Burton, 2015; Mazerolle, Burton, & Cotrufo, 2015; Staurowsky & DiManno, 2002). Burton (2015) suggested that there are numerous reasons why women have not seen the same increases in ability to secure leadership positions as they have seen in participation opportunities, including the gendered nature of sport, stereotyping, discrimination, organizational culture, leadership expectations, and occupational turnover. Although the aforementioned may occur within different levels (i.e., society, the organization, and the individual), they work together to limit the opportunities of women within the sport industry.

Gender Normalcy and Homologous Reproduction

Gender normalcy occurs when gender inequity is present at the organizational level despite the fact that qualifications of male and female employees are identical, suggesting gender equity is more appropriate (Claringbould & Knoppers, 2012). This normalcy occurs in two facets: normalizing the skewed ratio of women to men and the duties assigned based on gender (Claringbould & Knoppers, 2012). For example, if more women complete certain tasks, then the tasks are labeled as "woman's work" and vice versa for men. Women normalize being one of the few or the only woman in a sport organization, and men attribute the lack of women in sport organizations to a lack of aspiration, not opportunity (Claringbould & Knoppers, 2012).

Homologous reproduction is another barrier that prohibits women from reaching leadership positions in collegiate athletics. Homologous reproduction is the process by which dominant groups or individuals reproduce themselves through hiring similar individuals based on social and physical characteristics (Stangl &

Kane, 1991). For example, if a White male is the head of a hiring committee, he would be more likely to hire another White male to fill a vacant role. This happens across gender and race as people are more likely to hire those who look like them. However, this hiring practice is problematic for everyone in the organization, especially women. The landscape of collegiate athletics preserves heteronormative gender roles and thus marginalizes, excludes, and devalues women in the sport organizational workforce (Hardin, Whiteside, & Ash, 2014; Whisenant & Mullane, 2007).

Organizational Barriers

Women face challenges in both vertical and lateral career mobility within collegiate athletic administration. Ascension into leadership positions typically requires working in the business aspects of collegiate sport or with high-profile sports, and women are rarely given the opportunity to work in these areas (Hardin, Cooper, & Huffman, 2013; Taylor & Hardin, 2016). Instead, women are often funneled into the “soft areas” of intercollegiate athletics, such as academic counseling and life skills development (Grappendorf, Pent, Burton, & Henderson, 2008; Hultin, 2003). The result of this is that women are deemed not to have the necessary experience to hold a leadership position (Taylor & Hardin, 2016). In addition, women may lack a mentor, due to the relatively small number of women in authority positions, which can lead to missed networking opportunities, dead ends, detours, and unusual paths that make it difficult to pursue and maintain leadership opportunities (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Noe, 1988).

Sagas and Cunningham (2004) compared determinants of success of women and men athletic administrators and found that men profited more from their social capital than did women. This suggests that women have to work harder and are more limited in their influence than men; thus, they have a greater need for an influential mentor (Sibson, 2010). All of these factors can cause a decrease in women in leadership positions, career mobility, professional advancement, and organizational diversity (Hultin, 2003; Ryan & Haslam, 2005).

Work–Life Balance

Work–life negotiations are another barrier that can cause difficulties in career progression and mobility for women in collegiate athletic administration. Research has found that individuals who experienced high work/family conflict felt distress and dissatisfaction (Frone, Yardley, & Markel, 1997; Netemeyer, Boles, & McMurrian, 1996), physical and emotional exhaustion (Duxbury, Lyons, & Higgins, 2011), and burnout (Netemeyer et al., 1996). Lack of time and organizational support have been found to be a common reason for women working in collegiate athletics departments to leave the profession at an early age (Kamphoff, 2010). By contrast, individuals who have work–life balance felt a sense of enrichment, security, and an overall higher sense of well-being (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006). Women have been found to stay in positions longer when they receive organizational support that aids in managing work and family obligations in a healthy way (Bruening & Dixon, 2008).

NCAA Division I coaches who were also mothers reported a sense of fulfillment from their role as a coach, but they dealt with feelings of guilt and anxiety being away from their children (Dixon & Bruening, 2007). The accepted norms and policies of an organization may influence these feelings of guilt or anxiety based on meso-level constraints, such as work schedule, job pressure, and

stress (Burton, 2015; Dixon & Bruening, 2007). A greater burden was placed on female employees as opposed to male employees if organizations failed to support a healthy work–life balance (Burton, 2015). Specifically, women face the added barrier of work–life conflict, where involvement in one role makes it difficult to participate in the other (e.g., work responsibilities interfere with wife/mothering responsibilities and vice versa; Linehan & Scullion, 2008). Although men may experience this work–life conflict, it is often more pronounced in the lives of women. Traditionally, men and fathers are asked to provide financially for their family and to provide the discipline for children (Coakley, 2006; Graham & Dixon, 2014), whereas women are expected to provide extensive childcare as well as completion of most household duties (e.g., cooking, cleaning; Goldberg, Tan, & Thorsen, 2009).

Purpose

Women face many challenges as they pursue careers in collegiate athletics. Not only do these women face barriers to entry, but they also have struggled to advance in the field (Kamphoff, 2010; Taylor & Hardin, 2016). Research has been conducted on women working within the NCAA Division I level of collegiate sports (Burton, Grappendorf, & Henderson, 2011; Hancock & Hums, 2016; Taylor & Hardin, 2016); however, less attention has been given to women working at conference offices. Thus, the purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of women who are NCAA Division I conference commissioners and how they were able to ascend to these positions of leadership using CCT as a theoretical framework. The findings from this study can provide insight for women pursuing careers in collegiate athletics or for women pursuing careers in other male-dominated professions. The findings can also be advantageous for educators as they prepare women for a career in collegiate athletics or areas supporting collegiate athletics. The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1: What are the experiences of Division I female conference commissioners?

RQ2: How do female conference commissioners negotiate the demands of their position?

Methods

A qualitative research approach was implemented to understand the experiences of female NCAA Division I conference commissioners (Veal & Darcy, 2014). It is important to understand the experience of the female conference commissioners as a potential model for women within the historically patriarchal industry of sport (Messner, 1988; Van Manen, 2015). This design was chosen to elicit a thick description of the experiences of the research participants (Van Manen, 2015). Researchers were especially interested in the career trajectory of participants, so the qualitative design of the study allowed for participants to provide in-depth detail of their experiences with developing a broader skill set (i.e., career adaptability), career aspirations and interests (i.e., vocational personality), and decision-making processes (i.e., life themes).

Interviews were chosen as the instrument of data collection to elicit the inner thoughts and experiences of the women (Seidman, 2013). The participant’s experiences were the central focus of the study, so interviews allowed for the exploration into the participant’s perspective rather than observing the women in their work setting and also clarification if more information was needed

had asked for too long of an interview period. In addition, interviews were not exploratory in nature as interview questions were fashioned around CCT, allowing for a more concise interview guide. Phone interviews are also generally shorter in duration than face-to-face interviews as participants should not be expected to conduct a lengthy phone conversation (Singletary, 1994).

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and formatted for analysis by the researchers, then sent to the participants for member checking (Merriam, 2009). Member checking is one step in the data validation process (Gratton & Jones, 2004; Veal & Darcy, 2014) and allows participants to review their interview transcript to ensure that their responses were accurately transcribed (Andrew, Pedersen, & McEvoy, 2011). The transcripts were then coded individually by three researchers followed by coding as a research team (Saldaña, 2015). Constant comparative analysis was used to code the data. During this process, codes of individual instances were continually compared with the rest of the data. The overall goal of constant comparative data analysis is to find patterns (Merriam, 2009). “Meaningful and manageable themes” were created through grouping of quotes of related career progressions, experiences, or ideas (Patton, 1987, p. 150). Exact wording was used as often as possible to retain and reflect the meaning (Berg, 1998; Creswell, 2013). Through the attentive reading and rereading of the coded data, emergent themes were identified (Rice & Ezzy, 1999). Hoffman (2010) and Grappendorf et al. (2008) used comparable methods in their data analysis on populations of female senior women administrators, a population that is similar in nature to one of the current study. The data analysis style used by the researchers in this study is a widely used method for analyzing qualitative research (Patton, 1987).

Findings and Discussion

The average age of the participants was 49.25 years. Five of the women reported they were single, two reported they were married, and one reported being in a relationship. Those women who were married indicated that their spouses were also employed: one worked in athletics and the other in a corporate business environment. Both women who were married indicated having (grown) children. No other participants mentioned children or specific family members for whom they were the primary caregiver for. All eight women had earned or were in the process of earning an advanced degree. The undergraduate majors of the participants varied from areas in business to areas in the social sciences and kinesiology. The graduate degrees earned by the women included law, sport management, education, and business administration. Five of the eight women had participated in collegiate athletics. The participants had held a variety of positions within collegiate athletic departments, including graduate assistant, assistant coach, head coach, compliance director, and assistant or associate athletic director. In addition, these women held positions at the NCAA national office and conference offices, such as championship events, legislation/compliance, academic/membership services, and assistant/associate conference commissioner.

As the participants discussed their experiences and the daily negotiations required of them to be successful in their careers, several commonalities emerged. Researchers then used CCT as a framework during data analysis, and three themes were identified: (a) work–life negotiation (career adaptability and life themes), (b) gender normalcy (life themes) with subtheme (1) the acceptance of women without the pressures of football and donors, and (c) organic mentorship relationships (vocational personality).

Questions to assess the career adaptability pillar of CCT:

- 1) How did having a mentor aid in your career success?
- 2) How did you secure your mentor?
- 3) How do you still utilize mentorship relationships?
- 4) How do you maintain a healthy work–life balance?

Questions to assess the vocational personality pillar of CCT:

- 1) Tell me about how you got to where you are?
- 2) Can you tell me about a turning point in your career that was pivotal to your career progression?

Questions to assess the life themes pillar of CCT:

- 1) Can you discuss a time your gender was the topic of conversation in your workplace (either behind your back or to your face)?
- 2) How do you interact with other female conference commissioners?
- 3) How have you been able to create relationships with other female conference commissioners?
- 4) What advice would you give women trying to break into athletic administration?

The work–life negotiations discussed by respondents included daily decisions they were required to make on how to prioritize time between their professional life and personal life. Gender normalcy refers to the normalized gender discrimination participants faced during their career progression. Although the participants discussed instances of gender discrimination throughout their career, they believed women have made further strides within the conference office, versus on-campus athletic departments, due to the decreased presence of football and donors. This increased acceptance of female leadership deviated from the usual gender discrimination faced by women within intercollegiate athletics and created a subtheme within the gender normalcy theme. Finally, in the organic mentorship theme, the female conference commissioners vocalized their preference for organic mentor relationships over formalized mentorship programs.

Work–Life Negotiations

All eight respondents admitted collegiate athletics is an ever-changing industry, which causes employees to have incredibly busy schedules. Work–life balance challenges are not only experienced by women working in collegiate athletics; both men and women work long hours, weekends, and travel for their jobs. However, due to traditional societal norms, women who have a family and hold careers may face additional work–life conflicts because the involvement in their work role may make it difficult for them to participate in their mothering and/or wife duties (Linehan & Scullion, 2008). Lack of time and family responsibilities have been cited as reasons as to why women working in collegiate coaching and athletic administration may decide to leave the profession prematurely (Kamphoff, 2010). Research on women working in collegiate coaching and administration has focused on work–life balance, or the lack thereof, but the conference commissioners did not discuss their work–life imbalance, but rather their constant work–life negotiations.

The work–life negotiation theme parallels the career adaptability pillar of CCT. Career adaptability refers to an individual's ability to cope with developmental tasks and may influence the relationship between his/her social expectations and occupational interests. In this case, the female conference commissioners have to make daily negotiations regarding their occupational and social worlds, allowing them to continuously learn and grow within their career while also attempting to maintain personal relationships. Components of the life themes pillar under CCT also come into play for this theme. The participants' personal, family, and social life influenced their ability to grow in their career, which is a key element within the life themes pillar. The decisions participants made outside of work directly impacted their ability to climb the collegiate athletics "corporate ladder" and see a great deal of success.

Beth stated, "First off, I hate the word balance, I think it's more about work/life integration." Similarly, Gerri said, "I have come to the opinion that balance implies scale or appropriate balance (of both at the same level) and I think that's unrealistic all the time." She went on to say,

Most of the time it should be balanced, but at any given day or time, it may not be. There are going to be times when family is all consuming and you hope there aren't too many times when work is all consuming, but you have to make time for those instances.

Conference commissioners have many competing interests and priorities, and part of the responsibility of being in such a

position of authority is learning how to prioritize professional and personal responsibilities.

All eight participants discussed experiencing work–life imbalance early in their career, but accepting it because as Alice said,

I think we all have to take advantage of the opportunities that we are given and I mean that personally and professionally. I think when you are young and you want to advance you should be hungry and you should devote all of your time, energy, and effort to going after your goals. And if those goals are professional, it means making sacrifices to attain them.

Alice's comment illustrates a structural component of collegiate athletics that may limit women in their career mobility. By indicating that it is up to the individuals to make the decision to devote all their time, energy, and effort to attaining their professional goals, one assumes that they have no other responsibilities outside of the workplace or a support system that allows for this. Even if a woman has limited personal responsibilities or has a support system that allows for total dedication to work, social norms may dictate a low level of acceptance for women who make these life "sacrifices." Ellie echoed Alice's comments by saying, "I did not have work/life balance for the first 15 years of my career." Ellie acknowledged her lack of balance, but discussed how she did not want to go on a 2-week vacation and potentially miss an opportunity for advancement. Agreeing, Felicia said, "The first five (years) are a blur because you've got so much going on and you're trying to get yourself situated. I traveled a lot for the first couple of years to all of our schools. And I would try to have as many professional conversations as I could." Felicia went on to discuss how she attempted to utilize every trip as a learning opportunity and the more conversations with university employees, players, and fans she had, the more she could learn.

Because of the nature of the jobs held by these women, a constant negotiation between time spent with their work life and personal life was crucial for their job success. The participants understood that their job responsibilities existed 24 hr a day, 7 days a week instead of a typical 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. schedule. The intense time demands have become a harsh reality for all intercollegiate athletics employees; however, those employees with outside responsibilities often struggle to meet the demands of both their work and life responsibilities. This structural aspect of the industry may work to limit the career mobility of female employees.

Other commissioners discussed having to be purposeful with their time. Denise discussed how important it is to make personal obligations and interests (e.g., family, outside hobbies) a priority in your life. She said, "I think that you have to realize whether you're in intercollegiate athletics or you're in corporate America, every profession can gobble up or eat 100% of your time, if you let it." She went on to say that if you are not purposeful in your scheduling, days will turn into weeks, weeks into months, and months into years and you'll say, "Oh my gosh, I can't believe I just missed the family reunion." Gerri echoed Denise's point by discussing how she always rearranged her schedule on Halloween when her children were little to see them in the Halloween parade. As she has a great deal of power and autonomy in her role as a conference commissioner, she was able to set the schedule and ensure she was out of the office in time (to see the parade). She also discussed a possible negotiation she may encounter; "Now when the president decides to have a meeting on Halloween, I have to modify that, but generally I'm not going to schedule anything for Halloween afternoon" she said. This is a situation where conference commissioners do not have complete autonomy because they are hired and evaluated by institutional

presidents among the conference membership. The culture of collegiate athletics does not always allow for flexibility even for somebody in a senior-level administrative position.

The respondents realize their schedule is not typical, so they had to learn to incorporate their personal priorities into their daily schedule. Felicia took time in the morning to exercise because she wanted to ensure she would have time to do it. She attempted to exercise after work when she first began her job as commissioner, but sometimes her workday would not end until 8 p.m. Other participants also discussed how a busy work schedule helped them improve their time management in relation to personal and family time by integrating both personal and professional responsibilities into their normal, daily routine. Alice discussed how she had learned to integrate her personal life and personal obligations into her professional life. She said, "You have to be smart about [time management] and intentional, but I absolutely don't believe work-life balance exists." Beth discussed how there is an "obligation to lead by example" and demonstrate effective time management because as she put it, "we're not going to serve anyone well by burning ourselves out."

CCT posits that an individual does not make decisions about his/her career without influence from other facets of his/her life, which is illustrated by the female conference commissioners who are constantly negotiating time between their personal and professional identities to be a successful athletic administrator and wife, mother, and/or friend. The negotiation of personal and professional time is particularly relevant to women as gender norms dictate that women have additional responsibilities outside of work that men do not. This negotiation is typically more intense during the early career stages, as illustrated by the participants in the current study (Kamphoff, 2010). The ability for participants to successfully negotiate time between their personal and professional life was heavily dependent on the flexibility of their organization and family (structure). Of the eight female conference commissioners interviewed for this study, five indicated that they were single, two married with (grown) children, and one in a relationship. Those women who were married indicated that their spouses were also employed: one worked in athletics and the other in a corporate environment. Despite the profession of their significant other, participants who were married admitted that their career often took precedence over that of their partner's. Of the female commissioners not interviewed, one is listed as married in her online conference office website biography, and the other makes no mention of her relationship status. Bass et al. (2015) found that it is not uncommon for unmarried coaches, or those who may identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning, to not include their relationship status in their online biography. They found only one coach out of all head coaches in NCAA Division I—Football Bowl Subdivision listed a same-sex partner in their biography on the athletic department website. Coaches who were interviewed as a part of the study believed that their institution would not be supportive of including a same-sex partner (Bass et al., 2015). Homophobia is present in sport, and it appears that there is a perception that it exists even at the level of college conference commissioners (Coakley, 2017).

The vocational personality (Savickas, 2005) of these female conference commissioners may be influenced by their gender as well as socialization and cultural norms within the industry of collegiate sport. It is possible that these unmarried conference commissioners felt societal pressure to pick (i.e., career or family) and made a personal sacrifice to further their career. Women in male-dominated environments, such as collegiate athletics, report

feeling pressures to pick between work and family responsibilities (LaVoi & Dutove, 2012; Leberman & LaVoi, 2011), creating a situation where women could be forced to completely leave the profession or immerse themselves in the profession, thereby sacrificing romantic relationships and family. A single woman who has (potentially unknowingly) chosen to immerse herself in her work, therefore, without wife and/or mothering duties, may also face difficulties creating an engaging life outside of work beyond traditionally feminine duties, such as caring for elderly family members (Linehan & Scullion, 2008). Taylor, Smith, and Hardin (2017) found that early career professionals and graduate assistants often lacked the time to create meaningful romantic and platonic relationships due to their hectic schedules. Although the single conference commissioners did not overtly say they chose work over having a family, all five of them cited making purposeful decisions to benefit their career even if they would limit their opportunity to have a family. For example, Ellie's discussion of heavy travel in the first 15 years of her career. She said her "balance" was very skewed toward the work side of things, but she went on to discuss, "It was what I wanted to do. I loved work. I was willing to commit to the time and travel, and commit my life to it." Felicia remembers being told "you're going to be working when everyone else is playing, ya know, nights and weekends too" when she graduated college and thinking, "That's fine with me, because I was young. But then you get to my age, and I'm like, 'Gosh if I add up all the nights and weekend I worked I should be retiring by now.'" These women did not seem to care what traditional society norms were telling them (i.e., women should get married and stay home to take care of the family); they were willing to make personal sacrifices for professional successes.

However, the three participants who indicated that they were married or in a relationship discussed how their significant other was extremely supportive of their career choice and even willing to give up a job opportunity to move with them. Having this support from their significant other allowed the female conference commissioners to dedicate more time to their career and potentially take off the burden of traditionally feminine tasks, such as housework and child care. Support from a partner is crucial for women who work in a high powered, time-intensive career and also have a family, which was the case for two of the participants. Some commissioners also discussed seeking help and support from sources outside their family. Gerri discussed having a nanny for 4 years after her children were born saying, "It was really helpful when the kids were little." She went on to say how this gave her and her husband the ability to spend more time at work, which was critical for success when you work in an industry that requires a heavy time commitment. Carrie also utilized a nanny and said, "She worked with us throughout the growing up and even continued working with our family after the kids were gone. So without that kind of help I couldn't have succeeded." This suggests that it is possible to achieve a high level of professional success while also having a family; however, from the experiences of the women in this study, additional help is necessary. Unfortunately, not all women have access to this type of additional support, which may limit their ability to successfully navigate the work-life balance conflicts they face.

Working in sports, particularly college athletics, can be described more of a lifestyle than a job (Dixon & Warner, 2010; Gaffney, Hardin, Fitzhugh, & Koo, 2012). The responsibilities of the position must be accomplished during the traditional workday with additional events occurring in the evening and on weekends. Although conference commissioners may not have as many evening events to attend

Honestly, no. I can't think of one experience where it was specific to gender. I mean, there were certainly some power plays that coaches tried to make. They tried to position themselves in a way, but I don't think it was gender, I think it was just (the) college athletics industry and people trying to create their own territory or positioning.

We sat down at breakfast and he looked me right in the eye and he said we need to figure out how we can get some of these scholarships away from the women, so that we can fully fund the football team.

Carrie went on to say, “I was like, coach, coach, no, we’re not going to do that,” then joked that “He must have been really happy he finally got a female commissioner overseeing football.” The joking nature of Carrie’s comments suggests that she believes this type of behavior as acceptable. Although Carrie’s interaction seems to suggest the existence of blatant sexism, these overt sexist comments are not the only way this discriminatory behavior becomes ingrained in a culture. The experience of implicit, every day, “hard to put your finger on,” gender discrimination also plays a role in the creation of the gendered culture we see at all levels of intercollegiate athletics.

Gerri discussed experiencing this implicit resistance when attempting to get onto the NCAA football oversight committee. Despite having experience working on men's and women's NCAA basketball committees, she was unable to gain access to "the table," until her former supervisor at the NCAA office offered his assistance. She recognized that it was crucial to gain access to the table not only to be involved in the discussion, but also because there were football coaches in the room. She also discussed how she was not the only person at the table who had not played or coached college football, but still had an extremely difficult time gaining access to the table. This instance illustrates how gender plays a powerful role in who is granted access to the table where important decisions are being made. Despite Gerri's experience with (male, revenue generating) sport oversight, she still needed a man to vouch for her before she was accepted to the biggest stage (i.e., football). Although not everyone who already had access to the table had experience playing or coaching football, their male status granted them permission and acceptance. Gerri was not afforded. Heather mentioned that although she does not go through life with a laser focus on whether or not she experienced discrimination based on her gender. She said,

I'm sure a lot more has happened that I've been naive to or just that ignorant of. At the same time, time I'm not completely ignorant of those types of things and as I've gotten older and much more aware of the subtleties from a gender (standpoint), whether it's just discrimination, just negative actions or words being used.

Heather was not the only participant to discuss how it was possible that they had “been naive to or just that ignorant” of these instances, especially early on in their career. These comments suggest that the female conference commissioners may be aware of

the discriminatory culture of the collegiate athletics industry, but continue to work through the gendered experiences. All eight of the participants expressed enjoying their (current and previous) job(s), and a desire to continue working in collegiate athletics suggesting that they have learned to accept the preceding discrimination. This learned acceptance may be necessary to persist in the industry. The idea that challenging the current culture can be problematic for a woman's career is easily illustrated using both previous research and recent events within intercollegiate athletics. Burton et al. (2011) noted that Division I athletic administrators believed a male candidate would be more likely to be selected for an athletic director position than a female candidate, thus creating potential structural constraints for women to advance within the industry. Recent events from college campuses across the country show that women who have challenged the current structure within athletic departments are often punished for their behaviors (see Tracey Griesbaum and the University of Iowa or Beth Burns and San Diego State University).

CCT suggests that life themes can influence the decisions an individual makes about his/her career development (Savickas, 2005). The prolonged exposure to sexist behavior and gendered discrimination may play a role in the burnout and dropout rates of women working in collegiate athletics. The women who choose not to leave the profession may simply take this behavior as part of the working environment and choose to pursue senior administrative or leadership positions. Women working in these male-dominated industries may become accepting of these behaviors, leading to the behaviors going unnoticed. The life themes pillar suggests an interaction between personal decision making and career development, which may be helpful in understanding why individuals make decisions concerning their career. Once the behaviors become accepted within the organization, the women may eventually stop noticing they occur, creating a seemingly positive workplace culture and environment despite the fact women are still seen as outsiders. The nature of the harassment may also influence acceptance of behavior and decisions to leave the profession. Although overt harassment still occurs in many industries, we are seeing a shift from traditional harassing behaviors to more ambiguous or subtle tendencies (e.g., microaggressions; Basford, Offermann, & Behrend, 2014). These microaggressions, although discriminatory in nature, may go undetected by women in the workplace because they are so vague. Women may not fully understand the intention of comments being made or that they are prejudice, so classifying and reporting them as discrimination is extremely difficult. These aggressions, despite being subtle, still work to create a hostile work environment for women.

Similar to previous research, the female conference commissioners interviewed in this study expressed experiencing instances of gender inequity in the workplace (Cunningham, 2008; Taylor & Hardin, 2016). Despite the fact that almost all of the participants were adamant they had never experienced gender discrimination, many went on to describe experiencing instances that could be classified as gender discrimination, illustrating the idea of gender normalcy. This phenomenon has been illustrated in previous research as well. Ilies, Hauserman, Schwochau, and Stibal (2003) found that women will report higher rates or instances of sexual harassment and discrimination when they are given scenarios describing instances considered sexual harassment and discrimination as opposed to simply asking them whether or not they have been sexually harassed or discriminated against. Research within the sport industry suggests that the presence of gender normalcy contributes to the underrepresentation of women within sport

organizations (Burton, 2015). The male-dominated nature of many sport organizations and/or the masculine emphasis of sport itself may explain the existence of these instances of gender bias. Furthermore, a great deal of research on male-dominated work environments suggests that the culture of these industries becomes accepting of this behavior (McLaughlin, Uggen, & Blackstone, 2012), and the experiences of the women in this study further those studies. Ellie's final comment about her experience with gender discrimination may encapsulate the idea of accepting this behavior as well as illustrate the subtle level it exists at. She stated, "I do feel that there were certain opportunities for advancement that might not have been open to me because I was female, but in terms of explicit gender comments and conversations, no." Although the participants had differing career paths, sport experience, and education, they all experienced similar gender discrimination, which suggests that the period in which they moved up the career hierarchy may have impacted their experiences. The average age of the participants was almost 50 years, and many of these women have worked their way up the ladder through intercollegiate athletic departments, the NCAA headquarters, and within conference offices starting fresh out of their undergraduate education. The world of intercollegiate athletics was much different 25 years ago when many of the participants were beginning their career. The longevity of their career may play a role in the gender discrimination experiences they have had.

The acceptance of women without the pressures of football and donors. Despite having experienced instances of gender discrimination, the participants expressed feeling like the culture of collegiate athletics is changing in a positive way, at least at the conference office setting. These women did discuss that although there has been an increase in the number of female Division I conference commissioners during the past decade, there is still stagnation in the percentage of female collegiate coaches and administrators, especially at the Division I level. Research shows that there has been a relatively minimal drop in the percentage of female coaches coaching women's teams during the past decade, 44.1% in 2004 versus 43.4% in 2014 (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014). However, women have not coached more than 50% of women's teams since 1986, suggesting stagnation in the growth or decline of female collegiate coaches.

Many of the female commissioners attributed this stagnation to the additional influences that may be found on college campuses. Gerri said, "The presidents who hire commissioners don't really have to answer to donors on who they hire like on a campus." She discussed how the role of the commissioner is to manage a number of issues, such as coaching issues or initiating championships, and although they work with athletic directors, they do not work with donors. Heather shared a similar opinion, saying she believes that there are more politics at play being hired as an athletic director than as a commissioner, "local politics that conferences don't have." She said that when hiring a commissioner, the presidents may be more empowered to make a decision on hiring who they think is best for the job absent of what it may mean for donors. Ellie echoed these statements as well, saying, "I think presidents want to hire diverse staffs on campus, but they get pressure, especially when football is involved, from a pretty nondiverse group of people."

Denise discussed how hiring committees for the athletic director position may be focused on revenue generation, male sports, or football and that there is a, "predisposition to think that hiring someone who has played football, coached football, or been in that environment could be the optimal candidate which obviously cuts out 50% of the population, which are women." This idea

was illustrated within the population of commissioners interviewed. Despite prior relevant experience when Gerri attempted to secure a seat on the NCAA football oversight committee, she was unsuccessful until a man “vouched” for her. She noted that others on the committee lacked experience with football, like she did, they were all men so they were accepted at “the table.” Alice discussed how women’s sport is still evolving, participation of women is becoming more popular and acceptable. However, she also states that women are still lagging behind men in many leadership positions around the university saying, “I think you’ve got individuals in leadership positions who are male and, it’s probably human nature that those individuals want to work with and hire individuals that look like them, sound like them, behave like them.” Previous research would suggest that this “human nature” to want to work with those who “look like them, sound like them, behave like them” is very real. Homologous reproduction creates difficulty for women trying to break into the industry of collegiate athletics due to the fact that so few athletic directors are women. All of the conference commissioners agreed there was not one specific reason for the lack of women in leadership positions in on-campus athletic departments, but a whole host of reasons that are cultural, social, and logistical.

It is possible this subtheme demonstrates that women have more opportunities for career advancement within conference offices because of the manner in which they are hired, filling a gap in what is currently known about the experiences of women working in intercollegiate athletics. As noted by the respondents, hiring within on-campus athletic departments may be accompanied by a great deal of pressure from donors to gain or maintain success on the football field, whereas hiring within conference offices seems to be more skill set based. This point is illustrated through Denise’s experience of being contacted by a search committee and asked to apply for a commissioner position she initially did not feel qualified for but ended up being offered and Gerri’s experience working with a conference office that created a special position for her to bring her on staff. Conference office employees may also have a broader scope in terms of job duties, whereas on-campus positions are typically focused on a very specific area of intercollegiate athletics, allowing individuals without experience working in football to be successful.

Although the number of employees at the conference office is relatively small, especially compared with on-campus athletic departments, having a woman in the conference commissioner positions creates an opportunity for change in the acceptance of women in leadership roles. Although the conference commissioner does not directly hire athletic directors or coaches for universities within their conference, the commissioner does have a great deal of power in setting the agenda for the conference. It is the conference commissioner’s job to provide leadership for the entire conference, which allows for the development of large-scale initiatives that may help drive change. If the conference commissioner believes increasing diversity (e.g., increasing the presence of gender, race, and/or sexual orientation minorities) is important for the success of their conference, they can create training and education opportunities that go beyond their small office and reach the staff of all athletic departments under their conference umbrella.

Organic Mentorship Relationships

Research on women in leadership positions within collegiate athletics suggests that women may struggle to find female mentors

within the profession and must rely on male mentors as well as formal mentorship programs to pair them up with female mentors (Taylor & Hardin, 2016). The women in this study echoed the importance of mentorship, but they believed that mentor–mentee relationships created through organic relationships were more beneficial than those created through formal programs. The theme of organic mentorship relationships relates to the vocational personality pillar of CCT, which refers to a person’s abilities, values, needs, and interests in reference to his/her career. These abilities, values, needs, and interests can be reinforced by personal factors, such as an individual’s gender, personality, self-efficacy, and human capital. These organic mentorship relationships are created in a way that directly, and positively, impacts the needs, values, abilities, and interests of the female conference commissioners while also positively impacting the personal factors of the female commissioners.

Heather said, “I really support the concept of mentoring. I think it’s incredibly important for women in any field, especially from my experience in college athletics. I will say that my mentors have all happened organically.” She went on to discuss how she has participated in the formal mentorship programs several times and she fully supports their concept; however, she needs the personal connection with someone compared with “just being matched up with someone.” All of the formal mentorship relationships Heather had ultimately fizzled out before a real connection could be made or benefits added. Alice echoed these statements, saying she secured her mentors organically and informally; just based on relationships that were built over time. She stated, “There were a number of individuals who just by watching them and learning by example, they served as a mentor as well.”

Gerri discussed how she never said to herself, “I need a mentor and I’m going to find one.” She went on to verbalize how her mentorship relationships started by saying, “They happened organically and naturally through relationships that I just developed and they started very early on.” She mentioned that believing organic mentorship offered the most benefits because if they develop spontaneously they can become natural and keep going. She said, “They become almost like a friendship, but a little bit different in the mentor–mentee relationship than a friendship because one person is advising the other, right so it is a little bit different (than a friendship).” Felicia was also in support of organic mentorship relations. She stated the key is, “building genuine relationships, not that, ‘Oh I called this (person) five times in the last month’ and now I’m going to check that off.” The women also often used mentorship relationships to create personal relationships through work connections instead of engaging in formal mentorship programs that pair two strangers together in attempts to cultivate a mentorship relationship. These relationships might be created with an intern or early career professional in their office or someone they meet at a professional conference. Early on in their careers, many of the female conference commissioners in this study experienced a great deal of success from organically grown mentorship relationships. Although the participants did not discuss a timeline on how long it takes these organic mentorship relationships to form and bloom, their experiences match those from previous research.

This organic mentorship has been found to establish a deeper and more valuable mentoring relationship (James, Rayner, & Bruno, 2015) that allows for higher levels of trust, comfort, and communication and even more favorable outcomes in job satisfaction (Ragins & Cotton, 1999). They discussed not remembering ever thinking, “I really need to find a mentor,” and then enrolling in a formal mentorship program, but rather than allowing them to be

There is something special about having other women colleagues that are the bosses; and you are working with schools, presidents, coaches, and others and managing all that we can kind of let our guard down with each other and be a little bit more vulnerable to say I don't know how to deal with this, can you help me?

Although it may seem as though these conference commissioners have created a “Good Ole Girls’ Club,” the participants did not describe it in that nature because they did not like the connotation associated with the “Good Ole Boys’ Club,” as they did not want to exclude anyone. These women are just now beginning to engage in organic mentorship relationships similar to those that men have been engaging in for years. The commissioners are taking their professional relationships outside of the office, comparable to when all the men in the office would get beers after work. However, it is possible that the commissioners in this study are purposefully inclusive because they are currently working in an industry that is often exclusive of women. The participants admitted that they would often reach across gender lines for advice, or seek advice from anyone and everyone they could and although they had created positive relationships with other female conference commissioners, they wanted to ensure that their “club” was not exclusive.

Ellie mentioned that the relationships between these female commissioners started long before they all became commissioners. Heather echoed this point as well. Both women discussed how many of them worked together in previous positions and “kind of came up together.” She said that they “rely on each other for support” and that their relationship is “definitely beyond professional. It’s kind of a blend of the personal and professional. We rely on each other for support,” and went on to discuss how they will frequently call each other for advice. Carrie said that although they (female Division I commissioners) are a small group, they are a “fairly tight knit group,” and that she knows for a fact that they are a group that is very supportive of each other in a meaningful way. The commissioners commented on how they were all purposeful in creating positive relationships with each other (i.e., other female commissioners). For example, when a new female commissioner is hired, all other female commissioners make it a point to reach out to her and offer their help. Despite the fact that all Division I conferences are extremely different, the women expressed the importance of learning from the successes and failure of other commissioners, as well as the want to help other women succeed in the conference commissioner position.

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endless task list and late night schedule. These women seem to be using their colleagues to create personal relationships and make meaningful decisions (i.e., life themes) within their careers. The participants use other female conference commissioners to make choices about their professional life (e.g., accepting a job, deciding whether or not to change jobs), which then impacts their personal life. The mentoring and professional relationships created by the participants may shed light onto why they are making certain decisions regarding their career development and progression (Savickas, 2005). Several participants discussed how they felt insecure about their abilities to secure a specific job, which led them to question whether or not they would apply. Often it was an organically created mentor who encouraged them to apply and offered a professional connection from their network to help secure the position. The encouragement and network growth helped the aforementioned participants secure positions in which they were initially hesitant about even applying for. Once they began their new conference commissioner position, they discussed how the newly created relationships with other female conference commissioners increased their self-efficacy. In addition, many of the conference commissioners had previously worked with, or at least interacted with, other current female conference commissioners, allowing for an easier transition from acquaintance to colleague or mentor and mentee. Ellie discussed the ease of creating relationships with other female commissioners whom she has known for more than 20 years:

It's really everyone has moved from on campus athletic departments or the NCAA office to conference offices, so we have a lot of communication with each other and do a lot of work together. And that just carried from entry level to leadership positions. It's nice to say some of us have known each other for over 20 years.

Conclusion

Conference commissioners had to be willing to relocate and take new positions, often holding several lower level positions prior to obtaining their first senior-level administrative position. There is no clear-cut path to becoming a conference commissioner as each of the participants had a variety of experiences and educational backgrounds. It is imperative though that those wishing to obtain senior-level positions be able to navigate work-life conflict because there is no clear boundary between professional and personal life at this level of leadership. Traditional societal norms played a role in the treatment of these female commissioners, illustrating that the acceptance of gender discrimination plays in the field of collegiate sport.

The eight female Division I conference commissioners illustrated all three components of CCT establishing career adaptability through work-life negotiations. The effective navigation of their work-family conflict allowed for the conference commissioners to achieve a high level of success within their professional career. In addition, the participants illustrated their vocational personality through engagement in organization mentorship relationships, which fostered skill development and the learning of contextual aspects of their careers. Finally, the life themes of these women influenced their decisions within the work space. Despite experiencing gender discrimination throughout their career, the female conference commissioners in the study persevered and successfully climb the administration ladder in intercollegiate athletics. Results indicate that high achieving women are now engaging in behaviors

that successful men have been engaging in for many years (e.g., organic mentorship, prioritizing work over family).

Future research should look at the experiences of male conference commissioners, particularly as they related to organic mentorship, as it may be interesting to compare the experiences of the two due to the relatively small number of high-ranking female administrators within collegiate athletics. In addition, future research should focus on the family structure of women in conference commissioner positions and how it impacts their ability to successfully negotiate professional and personal responsibilities.

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